

CHAPTER 6

RECREATION

The Lake Okeechobee Planning Area has three major recreational areas: Lake Okeechobee, the Okeechobee Waterway, and the Kissimmee River. Lake Okeechobee is the heart of the region and is a major recreational resource for South Florida. The lake has one of the most productive freshwater sports fisheries in North America and is an important winter waterfowl observation and hunting area. The Okeechobee Waterway, which stretches 152 miles from Fort Myers to Stuart, links the Gulf and Atlantic coasts with the lake via the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers. The waterway has been used for decades by the Kissimmee Boat-A-Cade in its oceangoing trips. The Kissimmee River is currently undergoing a land acquisition program for environmental restoration, which will have an effect on future recreational activities. Although acquired lands will provide more opportunities for uses such as hiking and camping, navigation of larger boats on the restored section of the river will be limited.

The following provides a summary of the major challenge and strategy derived from the materials contained within this chapter.

Challenge: Flood control structure maintenance and traditional boat trail access need to be provided, in cooperation with user needs and protection of the native plants.

Strategy: Incorporate user input into the aquatic spray program to control exotic plants and minimize environment impacts to native vegetation.

A. GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Goal 1: Attain recreational opportunities that meet public demand and are consistent with other SWIM goals.

Objective 1: Develop and support recreational opportunities within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area to the maximum extent possible considering the environmental sensitivity and suitability of the area.

Strategy 1: Assist communities along Lake Okeechobee in developing recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, boating, canoeing, bicycling, birding, sailing, and other related outdoor activities.

Strategy 2: Continue developing appropriate SFWMD-owned lands and supporting development of other lands within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area as segments of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

B. RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Recreational opportunities in the Lake Okeechobee Planning Area include boating, fishing, sightseeing, picnicking, camping, hiking, bicycling, swimming, birding, horseback riding, and hunting.

The SFWMD and USACE have published several pamphlets of recreational facilities in Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway, as well as SFWMD land management areas along the Kissimmee River. These have been combined to produce a comprehensive list of recreation sites and their respective activities/public uses in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area (Table 15). In addition to these public recreation sites and land management areas, there are numerous private fish camps, marinas, boat tour and sightseeing facilities located near access points to the lake. Additional recreational information is available from federal and state agencies, chambers of commerce, tourism development councils, and the SFWMD Okeechobee Service Center.

The recreation sites in Table 15 are listed by county, except for the 27 management areas listed under the Kissimmee River Land Management Areas, which include properties acquired by the SFWMD for the restoration of the Kissimmee River. Some of these lands are under lease-back arrangements with former owners to allow them to utilize the lands for grazing purposes.

Table 15. Public Recreation Sites in Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area.

Recreation Site	Recreational Activities							
	Boating	Fishing	Picnic	Camping	Hunting	Biking	Hiking	Horse Back
Martin County								
Port Mayaca Recreational Area	X	X	(X)			A	A	
Port Mayaca Wayside Park			X					
Chancey Bay Access Area	X	X	(X)			A	A	
Indiantown Marina	X		X	X				
DuPuis Reserve	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
St. Lucie Lock & Dam	X	X	X	X				
Phipps Martin County Park	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Okeechobee County								
Henry Creek Lock Access Area	X	X						
Nubbin Slough Access Area	X	X	X					
Taylor Creek Access Area	X	X				A	A	
Okeechobee (Lock 7/Wayside)	X	X	X			A	A	
C. Scott Driver, Jr. Recreation Area	X	X						
Okee-Tantie Recreation Area	X	X	X	X		A	A	

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	Boating	Fishing	Picnic	Camping	Hunting	Biking	Hiking	Horse Back
Glades County								
Buckhead Ridge	X	X						
Indian Prairie Canal Access Area	X	X	(X)	X		A	A	
Bare Beach Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Harney Pond Canal Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Fisheating Creek Access Area	X	X	X					
Nicodemus Slough	U	U	U				U	
Sportsman's Village Access Area	X	X	X					
Moore Haven West (Moore Haven Recreational Village)	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Moore Haven East (Alvin Ward Pk)	X	X	X			A	A	
Ortona Lock & Dam (North)	X	X	X					
Ortona Lock & Dam (South)		X	X	X				
Hendry County								
Clewiston Recreation Area	X	X	X			A	A	
COE, Clewiston								
Port Labelle Marina	X							
Belle Hatchee Marina	X							
Barron Park			X					
Labelle Access Area	X		X					
Labelle Lions Park			X					
Lee County								
Alva Access Area	X							
W.P. Franklin Lock & Dam North	X	X		X				
W.P. Franklin Lock & Dam South	X		X					
Palm Beach County								
John Stretch Park	X	X	X			A	A	
South Bay Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Belle Glade Recreation Area	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Rardin Park	X	X	X			A	A	
Bacom Point		X	X			A	A	
Pahokee Marina and Campground	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Canal Point Lions Club Park	X	X	X			A	A	
Kissimmee River Land Mgmt Areas								
KICCO		X	X	X	X	X	X	
No Name Slough		X	X	X				
Boney Marsh	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Bluff Hammock	X	X	X	X				
Starvation Slough		X	X					
Oak Creek		X	X	X				

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Recreation Site	Recreational Activities							
	Boating	Fishing	Picnic	Camping	Hunting	Biking	Hiking	Horse Back
Hickory Hammock	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Turkey Hammock		X	X					
Cornwell Marsh East	X	X	X	X				
Cornwell Marsh West	X	X	X	X				
Micco Landing	X	X	X	X				
Chandler Slough - 1		X	X	X		X	X	
Chandler Slough - 2		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Fort Basinger								
Seaboard Marsh North	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Seaboard Marsh South	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
River Acres II		X	X	X		X	X	
Yates Marsh	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Telex Marsh	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Platt's Bluff	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Daughtry Cutoff	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Maple River	X	X	X	X		X	X	
70 N Marsh	X	X	X	X		X	X	
S-65E Impoundment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
M-2 Marsh (Part of Paradise Run)		X	X	X		X	X	
Mims Island (Part of Paradise Run)	X	X	X	X		X	X	

Note:

X = Activity allowed at site.

(X) = Activity proposed at site.

A = Access to Florida National Scenic Trail on Hoover Dike.

U = Access site under development. Uses will be allowed once the proposed construction contract is completed.

Source:

South Florida Water Management District Recreation Guide to Lake Okeechobee.

South Florida Water Management District Public Use Guide for Designated Land Management Areas.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Guide to Lake Okeechobee & Okeechobee Waterway Recreational Facilities.

C. SUMMARY OF RECREATION ISSUES**C1. Lake Okeechobee and Okeechobee Waterway**

The USACE's Lake Okeechobee and Okeechobee Waterway Master Plan (1986) identifies factors influencing public use, including existing conditions of the project's recreation resources and requirements needed to meet future demands. The main factor identified was a deficiency of supporting facilities at several heavily used areas for recreational fishing (boat and bank). Crowding at boat launching areas is exacerbated during the busy winter months and when there's combined usage for

waterfowl hunting and fishing. Other deficiencies were identified for campsites, hiking and bicycling trails, and picnicking facilities.

The FGFWFC reports that sport fishermen spent an estimated 742,347 hours fishing on Lake Okeechobee during the 1992-1993 winter-spring period and caught an estimated 1,097,711 fish (FGFWFC, 1993). Fishermen hours have increased 148 percent over the previous 10-year period reported in the FGFWFC 1983 Annual Report. Fishing and boating pressure continues to increase, particularly in the bay areas and littoral zone, where recreational fishing is concentrated.

There are many impediments to building additional facilities. The USACE may not develop or enhance recreational facilities without a cost-sharing sponsor, except those justified to serve other project purposes or for public health and safety (USACE, 1986). Interviews with staff at the FGFWFC reveal that there are a number of problems encountered in building boat launch ramps. These include the FGFWFC's priorities to repair over 200 existing ramps built throughout the state since 1960, the difficulties involved in meeting funding guidelines, and complications that arise when formal written agreements are required between multiple parties, including federal, state, local, and private interests.

Additional launch ramps are needed to meet the increasing demands for access to the rim canal and lake. Access to the lake is also affected by water levels and maintenance of boat trails; these issues are discussed in Chapter 7, which addresses navigation.

C2. Kissimmee River

The USACE's environmental restoration of the Kissimmee River: Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement (1991) identifies impacts to recreation and navigation resulting from restoration of the Kissimmee River. While acquisition of lands along the Kissimmee River will create additional recreational opportunities, including extension of the Florida National Scenic Trail (see discussion below), impacts on general boating and recreational boating are anticipated with implementation of the river restoration. Larger houseboats and other deep draft vessels may not be able to navigate within the restored reaches of the river, and water sports, such as water skiing will be limited to those reaches not included in restoration. This loss will be offset in part by opportunities for canoeists and fishermen using smaller boats. Fishing success on the restored river is expected to increase over the long term (USACE, 1991). Navigation issues arising from the Kissimmee River Restoration Project are further discussed in Chapter 7.

C3. Economic Significance of Recreation

The recreational industry is of significant economic importance to the Lake Okeechobee region. According to a 1987 study by Dr. Frederick Bell of Florida State University, Lake Okeechobee recreational fishing annually generates \$22

million (direct and indirect) and provides 495 jobs for the local economy. Therefore, it is critical to maintain adequate recreation facilities and meet future projected needs. Further research is needed to evaluate the economic development opportunities that exist by promoting recreational fishing and other activities, such as hiking and bicycling, in the region.

D. ONGOING ACTIVITIES

D1. Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance

In recognition of the eco-tourism potential of the region, the Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance (GLOTA) was formed in 1993 to promote a regional identity focusing on the natural scenic beauty and cultural heritage of the area. GLOTA is active in promoting hiking and bicycling around the Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail and other areas of the Florida National Scenic Trail. The alliance recently published a tourism pamphlet for the eight-county region served by the group.

The SFWMD participated in regional detailed design workshops that provided a forum for communities around Lake Okeechobee to develop master plans that share a common vision. This was a joint effort by the SFWMD, local governments, the regional planning councils, and groups such as GLOTA, Florida's Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative and the Conservation Fund. The concept was to ensure that community master plans are integrated with regional economic and environmental goals. Recreational development was an important component of these workshops.

D2. Florida National Scenic Trail and Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail

The Florida National Scenic Trail (FNST) is one of eight national scenic trails in the country. When completed, the trail will extend 1,300 miles through Florida from the Panhandle to the Big Cypress Preserve. Development and maintenance of the FNST is being spearheaded by the Florida Trail Association in cooperation with numerous public and private agencies, organizations and individuals. Portions of the trail in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area are continually being certified, providing recreational opportunities along the Kissimmee River and around Lake Okeechobee. Potential recreational opportunities include fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, bicycling, canoeing, and birding. There may also be opportunities to connect the trail to surrounding communities and provide equestrian access in limited areas.

The Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail is located in two districts of the FDOT. The western side of the lake (District 1) has received approximately \$4 million in Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds, and preliminary design and engineering work is underway. In June 1993, the Hoover Dike was

certified by the U.S. Forest Service as the Lake Okeechobee Segment of the FNST. Planning and future construction of this segment of the FNST involves intergovernmental coordination between federal, state, and local governments, as well as private interests such as the Florida Trail Association and entities supporting economic development around Lake Okeechobee. A master plan for trail improvements and trailhead development has been completed for Hendry, Glades and Okeechobee Counties. Of particular importance will be the design for road, bridge, and navigational lock crossings that will be needed to facilitate public use of the Trail (SFWMD 1995c).

Annual events on the Hoover Dike include the Big-O-Go and Big-O-Hike sponsored by GLOTA and the Florida Trail Association. Trail organizers from both groups have been a catalyst for trail development and are instrumental in promoting tourism in the region. The Big-O-Go is a 120-mile, four-day mountain bike marathon that was first held in November 1994. Due to its success and the success of the Big-O-Hike, a nine-day hiking event that has taken place every November since 1992, these events are anticipated to draw more participants in coming years. Both events promote economic growth to the region and have gained the cooperation and enthusiasm of communities around the lake.

Properties along the Kissimmee River have been purchased as part of the Save Our Rivers program. To date, two of the twenty-seven management areas have been certified by the U.S. Forest Service as sections of the FNST. The first is a 27-mile reach situated along the edge of the river floodplain between State Road 60 and the S-65B Lock and Spillway. This section of the Trail goes through the KICCO Wildlife Management Area and Avon Park Air Force Bombing Range (KICCO takes its name from the Kissimmee Island Cattle Company that operated there from 1915 through the late 1920s). The second segment is a nine-mile reach along Canal 38 (the Kissimmee River) between State Road 70 and State Road 78 near the mouth of Lake Okeechobee.

Additional lands along the Kissimmee River are being purchased by the SFWMD under the Save Our Rivers program. As lease-backs expire and parcels are acquired contiguous to certified sections, additional sections of the trail will be developed. The long-range plan is to extend the trail the full length of the Kissimmee River (SFWMD 1995c).

D3. Florida Cracker Trail

The Florida Cracker Trail is a historic east-west route that Florida cattlemen followed each spring until the 1930s. The Trail passes through Manatee, Hardee, Highlands, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties. Each year since 1988, the historical return trip of the cattle drive has been reenacted. The Florida Legislature named and recognized the Florida Cracker Trail in 1986, and the Trail is officially designated on FDOT maps.

D4. Fishing Tournaments

The FGFWFC estimates over 250,000 angler hours are dedicated to fishing tournaments on Lake Okeechobee annually. This accounts for 25% of all statewide tournament activity. Based on their reservation numbers, Okee-Tantie Park in Okeechobee hosted 50 tournaments in 1994. Other popular tournament sites are Roland Martin's Marina, Anglers Inn, Harney Pond, the Indian Prairie Canal, and the city ramps in Clewiston, Moore Haven, Lakeport, and Belle Glade. Combined, these sites probably host the same number of tournaments as Okee-Tantie.

D5. Boating Events

The Kissimmee Boat-A-Cade, formed in 1947, uses the Kissimmee Waterway for three annual boating trips totaling about 300 boats from the city of Kissimmee through Lake Okeechobee. From Lake Okeechobee, the boats proceed to either the east or west coast through the Okeechobee Waterway, depending upon their destination. The Boat-A-Cade has made trips to the Florida Keys and Charleston, South Carolina in the past. Boat sizes range from 18-40 feet.